

Deep, Top-to-Bottom Transformation

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 20:1-18

[Thomas Michael Smith](#)

CPC 4/23/00, Easter Sunday

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I want to thank our guests especially for coming to worship this morning. I want to thank you for honoring the request of a loved one, for being present in a way that brings wholeness to your family.

I'd like to begin by sharing an experience of a Muslim man, in Africa, who became a Christian, a man born into one religious tradition, who gave up those beliefs in order to invite Jesus to be his savior and the director of his life. Becoming a Christian from the Muslim tradition is no small thing, and exposes one to all sorts of discrimination, from family and from people at work. So, this man had to think long and hard before making a commitment to Christ, and had to be ready with an answer for those who would inevitably ask him about his conversion. Thus, when asked by friends, 'Why have you become a Christian?,' he answered in this way: "Well, it's like this. Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly the road forked in two directions, and you didn't know which way to go, and there at the fork in the road were two men. One of the men was dead and the other man was alive. Which one would *you* ask which way to go?"

I appreciate his response because it's both in his head and in his heart. One of the most frustrating things about being a pastor is that you come in contact with lots of people who say they would like to change. People come to me with various forms of emotional and spiritual distress, telling me that they want to change. I can see, from observing their state, that they need to change. They sincerely declare they want to change, but actually doing it is another matter.

Early on in counseling, one learns that it does little good to simply tell people they ought to change, or even to encourage them in their desire. The matter is much more difficult.

How many times have you attempted to intervene when you see a friend who was going down some path that you clearly knew to be the wrong one? You pick a time and in conversation, you say to him or her, "Why don't you consider doing this instead?"

Most of these conversations end in great frustration. You clearly see that your friend ought to be changing direction in his life, and he sees it too, but knowing what to do is quite different from actually doing it. As St. Paul says in Romans 7, 'I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... I can will what is right, but I can't do it.' In this passage, Paul speaks for us all.

Our personalities are like icebergs. We can see just the tip of the iceberg rising out of the water, but 90% of the iceberg is submerged. So it is with our consciousness. What you can see of us - what we can see of ourselves, verbalize about ourselves and rationally think through - is only the tip of the iceberg. Most of 'us' is submerged, far below the level of conscious thinking.

Your friend may say he wants to change and may be able to see clearly and consciously the path that should be taken. But then there is the matter of character, all of those inner dispositions, and habitual traits which make him who he is. It is very difficult to go against our basic character. This is why I say that I know there are few things more frustrating than attempting to help another person, particularly if the help you are offering is against that person's basic disposition.

Such moments, says C. S. Lewis, give us just a glimpse of what God must feel like with us on many occasions. God has given us a rich world in which to live, endowed each of us with great intelligence, and even a conscience to indicate to us how life ought to be lived. Yet, look at how we actually live.

Oh, you might say to yourself, 'Wait a minute! We aren't God! Someone attempting to counsel a friend is a far cry from God. God can make us do anything!' And it's true, God can do anything, but in creating us, God has chosen to give us the gift of freedom, freedom to choose, to live our lives in certain ways rather than other ways, to take one path and not the other. God has freely created us to be the sort of beings who are not subject to having some magic wand waved over our lives. We are not mere putty in the hands of God. We have a good deal of freedom, which we exercise every day, and with that freedom comes the risk that we may not live the sort of lives that God wants for us.

And of course this has been the traditional explanation for why things are so out of kilter in our lives. We keep choosing the wrong, doing the wrong, even when we may consciously know better. I know of a couple, outside this church, with some really significant problems. The husband is verbally and emotionally abusive to the wife, and the wife continues to enable his behavior by saying she knows he acts the way he does 'out of love.' And to some extent it's true. He needs her, is used to her and the dynamic they share, and certainly sends mixed messages of compassion and hurt and need and love. She understands some of this but doesn't really want to understand all of it because she has been told by her fundamentalist church that all she needs to do is love him more completely and follow this or that biblical regulation and all will be well.

This situation has dug into me as a vivid example of the ways in which we human beings intend to do good, but often do terrible wrong. My goodness, if we pervert something even so beautiful as love, imagine all the harm of which we are capable! I'm not simply saying some easy, 'Well, we all have our faults.' Let's be honest. It's deeper than mere faults and foibles. There's something within us, deep within us, that keeps making us into the sort of people who can know what is right, but can't do the right. We keep making wrong choices, boringly going over again and again the same self-destructive practices that bring us to grief.

If you've tried to be a friend to someone in need, sincerely trying to help that person get his or her life in order, and have been frustrated by that, then perhaps you have caught a glimpse of what it must feel to be like God. Little wonder that, after repeated attempts to help someone change, we give up. We avoid the person, saying to ourselves, 'Well, she is beyond help. I have done all I can.'

It's at this point that God differs from us. God keeps on loving. God does not let us go, simply because we are not the creatures we were intended to be. God does not merely offer us good advice, giving us a set of laws we ought to obey even though we usually can't. God comes and stands beside us, with us. As a matter of fact, the Bible is one long record of God's determination not to give up on us. God comes to us, through the patriarchs like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, through Moses and Aaron and Joshua, through the prophets and through the law given to Israel. Time and time again we turned away, disappointed

God, broke God's heart, but still God kept returning to us. God refused to be stumped by our sin, and our constant turning toward the wrong.

The prophet Jeremiah, in our first reading this morning, spoke of a new day when God would write a covenant, an agreement, a description of His relationship with humanity, not on tablets of stone as God did on Mt. Sinai before Moses and Israel, but a day when that covenant would be written on our hearts. And, oh, yes, *that's* the great challenge - *our hearts*. How strange, we can will what is right, and we can decide what to do, then the heart takes over, and we can't do what is right. Until something can be done about our character, our continual, inner disposition toward the wrong, you haven't done something about *us*.

And that's what this morning is all about. For when Jesus came forth from the tomb on Easter, He not only arose to new life but so do we. New life is really possible for us - even for people like us - people like us who find it terribly difficult to change, to start over, to begin again, to be new people. But you have to let Jesus in, so that your heart may be changed. You can't say YES to Jesus Christ and then return to the path of following the impossible commands of the law, as was the case with the couple I mentioned. As soon as they received the free gift of forgiving grace given by the resurrected Jesus, they trundled back to the old covenant of marital success by works and obedience, and in that process, they gave up on themselves, and allowed their relationship to stagnate.

Because Jesus rose from the dead, because God writes a new relationship, not on tablets of stone but within our hearts, we are therefore not permitted to give up on ourselves, or despair of our ability to be the sort of people we would like to be, because God has refused to despair of us, to give up on us. Easter is God's great defeat of defeat.

I know a man who for 18 years was enslaved to the bottle. His wife begged him but he couldn't stop. He eventually lost his marriage, his family, his job, his self-respect, and just about everything. As his pastor, I tried to help him, but I finally gave up. I think I even said to myself, 'He will never lick this, he is beyond help.' And that was an unfaithful, terrible thing for me to say in the light of the cross of Jesus and of Easter. Nevertheless, I lost track of him over the years. Then, some time ago, I ran into him, and we recalled the days when I was his pastor. Then he told me something wonderful.

'Pastor Tom,' he said, 'You might be interested to know that I have been alcohol free, sober, for the last eight years.' Interested? I'll say. We spoke for awhile, and I discovered that he finally was able to hear this news Jeremiah got out about 600 BC. He discovered Jesus, and discovered that he was raised with Christ on that Easter long ago. God started from the inside out, and worked something in the depths of his heart, which previously could only be inscribed in a list of rules. So don't tell me you have trouble believing in resurrection. I've seen it.

And if none of this makes any sense to you this morning, perhaps one last paragraph will. It's a story about little Philip, a boy born with Down's Syndrome who attended a third grade Sunday School class with several eight-year-old boys and girls. Typical of that age, the children did not readily accept Philip with his differences. But because of a creative teacher, they began to care about Philip and accept him as part of the group, though not fully. The Sunday after Easter, the teacher brought Leggs pantyhose containers to class, the kind that look like large eggs. Each receiving one, the children were told to go outside on that lovely Spring day, and find some symbol of new life, and put it in the egg-like container. Back in the classroom, they would share their new life symbols, opening the containers one-by-one in surprise fashion.

After running about the church in wild confusion, the students returned to the classroom and placed the containers on the table. Surrounded by the children, the teacher began to open them one by one. After each one, whether a flower or a butterfly or a leaf, the class would oooh and ahhh.

Then one was opened, revealing nothing inside. The children exclaimed, "That's stupid. That's not fair. Somebody didn't do their assignment!"

Philip spoke up and said, 'That's mine.'

A few of the students said, "Philip, you don't ever do things right. There's nothing there!"

And Philip said, "I did so do it! I did do it. It's empty, the tomb was empty!"

And after that there was silence. And from that point on, Philip became a full member of the class. Not long afterward, Philip died from an infection most children would have shrugged off. At the memorial service, the funeral, Philip's class of Sunday School eight-year-olds marched up to the chancel with their teacher, and each one laid on the communion table an empty pantyhose egg.

He is risen! He is risen, indeed!

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